

MISQUOTING MUHAMMAD

*The Challenge and Choices
of Interpreting
the Prophet's Legacy*

JONATHAN A. C. BROWN



ONE WORLD

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*For my beloved wife Laila,
who inspires me every day*

Islam in the Twenty-First Century

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*'In every object there is inexhaustible
meaning; the eye sees in it what the eye brings
means of seeing.'*

THOMAS CARLYLE

The French Revolution

Foreword

The Prophet Muhammad remains indispensable. The great debates of modern Islam – debates that, as this book shows, are great human debates – continue to be fought through the legacy of the Prophet, in his name, because of the Prophet, and in spite of him.

He is always present among Muslims. They continue to praise their Prophet and recall his virtues in sermons, devotional songs, and books galore. Today, as in centuries past, those who fear, are ignorant of, or hate Islam have zeroed in on the Prophet as the manifestation of their phobias, blasting him in books and YouTube clips. And so the Prophet's persona and legacy serve as vehicles for both the highest aspirations of Muslims and the most vicious vitriol toward them.

Salafis, Sufis, modernists, reformists, Wahhabis: whichever Muslim group, by whatever name one calls them, and in all their conceivable permutations, portray themselves as bearing the mantle of the Prophet. The Salafis claim to be the most authentic bearers of his authenticated words and deeds. The Sufis claim to be striving not just for the actions but also for the inner experience of the Prophet. Modernists talk about *Ijtihad*, or reinterpreting Islam according to what the Prophet would do and teach today. In short, they all claim to speak in Muhammad's name, quoting, misquoting, and contesting the legacy of the Prophet.

It is most appropriate that this book looks at the great questions of interpreting what Islam has meant and should mean through the lens of Muhammad. Perhaps until very recently, no Muslim had ever read the Qur'an with pure, naive eyes. Muslims had always read the Qur'an through the person and legacy of the Prophet, whether embodied in oral or written traditions, whether in inspired visions or through scholastic commentaries

and commentaries on commentaries. It is the contested legacies of the Prophet that have been the prime commentaries on the Divine text.

In this book, Professor Jonathan Brown walks the reader through some of the more contentious modern debates in Islam today, such as whether women can lead communal prayers; what happens to Muslims who leave Islam; and the role of violence in the modern state. Readers will be surprised at what they find, sometimes pleasantly and sometimes not. It is not to be expected that all readers will agree with Brown's conclusions. Yet one has to admire the rigorous and methodical way in which he analyzes the textual evidence for the various positions held on these issues.

Misquoting Muhammad comes at an opportune time. The author has quickly established himself as the foremost scholar of the Hadith (prophetic traditions), combining the most rigorous aspects of the Western academic study of Islam with the best of classical Islamic scholarship. In this sense, his work recalls the best of biblical scholarship by exponents such as Bart Ehrman. Reading this book will be rewarding in many and different ways for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

As a professor myself, and one reluctantly moving up in years, I cannot help but appreciate that Brown's book is also an important step in the career of an extraordinary scholar, one who is ready to bring the fruits of his formidable scholarship to a wider audience. Both the scholarly community and the general reading public are richer for his contribution.

Omid Safi

Preface

The title and the idea for this book was proposed by a crafty, teddy-bear-like friend of mine, who suggested writing a counterpart to Bart Ehrman's best-selling *Misquoting Jesus*. Though I still have not read the book, I have benefited greatly from Ehrman's other writings and could imagine what the book argued. I told my friend that I did not feel comfortable writing an 'unveiling Islamic origins' book, so he proposed framing the project more as 'contesting Muhammad.' This made much more sense, and thus the subtitle (for me, the real title) of the book emerged: the challenge and choices of interpreting the Prophet's legacy.

The contents of this book took shape starting in 2007, during my first year as a professor. At the time I was engrossed in the subject of forgery and looking at forgery in the Islamic tradition in a comparative light. Though this research ultimately made its way into chapter six of the book, the central themes of the volume originated not in my research but in my teaching and public lectures. It became clear to me that by far the most pressing questions befuddling both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences were how we should understand such-and-such a controversial Qur'anic verse, or such-and-such a provocative Hadith. During the question-and-answer time at talks I gave, I saw again and again the disillusioning clash between scripture and modernity acted out before me by individuals wondering how they should understand Islam today and what their relationship to the classical heritage of Islam should be. This book is not my attempt to give people *the* answers to these questions. Rather, it is my effort to lay out for the reader what some of the possible answers are and what their consequences might be.

I sit writing this in a bed and breakfast in Johannesburg, South Africa, Peter Tosh's 'Downpressor Man' playing on the music-video channel on a small TV. This city is a panoply of diversity. In the malls, people of all races and dress window-shop and wait for tables. Women in full face-veils and men with long beards and turbans stroll by without a passing glance from others. Back in the US, in the wake of the tragic Boston Marathon bombings, the media are still frenzied over distinguishing good, moderate Muslims from evil, extremist ones. No one of consequence ever acknowledges that 'good' and 'evil' in the American public square are too often not moral qualities or commitments to principle (a principled view might be, for example, 'The good person respects human life and protects the innocent at all costs; the evil kills and causes suffering ruthlessly'). Rather, they are tribal qualities. 'Good' corresponds to 'works to kill America's enemies' (American Muslims who joined the US military to fight in Iraq are thus good), and 'evil' means 'works to kill Americans or their allies or both' (Iraqi Muslims trying to defend their loved ones from random, dismembering explosions were evil). As for 'moderate' and 'extreme,' they map onto 'congruent with mainstream American culture' (Muslims who drink or don't cover their hair are thus moderate) versus 'clashes with mainstream American culture.'

I love coming to South Africa because it reveals so starkly how transient and fickle even our most fervent and supposedly absolute beliefs can be. Less than a quarter-century ago America's political establishment and its obsequious media considered Nelson Mandela to be a terrorist (he officially ceased to be for the US in 2008). Now perhaps no man in the world is more respected.* Many Americans and Western Europeans proudly trumpet the diversity of cosmopolises like London and New York without realizing that cosmopolitanism does not mean people of different skin colors all sitting around over wine at a bistro table complaining about organized religion. It means people who hold profoundly different, even mutually exclusive, beliefs and cultural norms functioning in a shared space based on toleration of disagreement.

As I ponder what this book I've written is about, I realize that it is as much as anything an expression of my desire to transcend the tribal and of my frustration at those who pass off cultural chauvinism and narrow-mindedness as liberalism, who use 'common sense' as a proxy for forcing one culture onto another on the pretext of imposing 'universal values;'

* In the time since this was written in May 2013, Mandela passed away.

who scoff at subservience to backward traditions when they see it in others but are blind to it in themselves; and who refuse to look at the cultural systems of others as – at least initially – equals that deserve to be judged by more than whether they drink beer, wear jeans, date or support some political agenda.

Johannesburg, South Africa

Acknowledgments

A number of friends and teachers assisted me in completing this book, but only I am to blame for its failings. Some read all or parts of it, and some lent expertise. Aunt Kate Patterson, Omar Anchassi, Rodrigo Adem, Matthew Anderson, Ovamir Anjum, Joe Bradford, Garrett Davidson, Robert Gleave, Matthew Ingalls, Tarek Al-Jawhary, Abdul Rahman Mustafa and Amine Tais suffered through readings and offered excellent suggestions and corrections. Jonathan Lyons in particular rendered me great service as a perceptive editor. Nuri Friedlander, Sher Ali Tareen and Maheen Zaman responded kindly to bizarre queries. Mohammed Fadel inspired me and upbraided me when necessary with his always animated discussion. Thomas Williams and my colleagues Jonathan Ray and Emma Gannage helped me with citations. Clark Lombardi has been a great friend and interlocutor, providing an elating elixir of legal expertise and outrageous humor. Abdul-Aleem Somers allowed me to use his massive library in Cape Town. My friends Asad Naqvi and Brendan Kerr, along with my sisters, have helped keep me sane. Sister Lucinda even hosted me in Kuala Lumpur. My brother-in-law Ben Ward came up with a surprisingly helpful list of suggested readings. I must extend my sincere gratitude to Umar Ryad for sharing his photo of Muhammad Tawfiq Sidqi with me, and Sherif Abdel Kouddous and his family for providing me with rare pictures of Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, *rahimahu Allah*. I'm grateful to the Cosmos Club of Washington, DC for the use of the Writers Room and the library. Of course, I thank Omid Safi and Oneworld Publications for pushing me to write this book to begin with.

I remain a drop in the ocean of my great teachers, whom I will not name here because I do not want them tarnished by any opinions I express in

the book. I owe great gratitude to my father, Jonathan C. Brown, and his wife Ayse for pushing me to write this book when it was lingering in the authorial limbo of the ‘forthcoming.’ They have never once turned me away when I needed help.

About my wife, Laila, I could say so much, but here I’ll restrict myself to expressing my fully realized gratitude for her putting up with my long nights awake downstairs typing and thumbing through books, or clacking away on my laptop on the floor of our bedroom because I wanted to be near her. She has done so much to inspire me to crawl out of the classics into the cacophony of the modern world. She bore all my travels with remarkable patience (often right beside me). Our son Mazen I must thank for waiting an extra week to be born so that I could finish chapter five, and for being such a joy ever since. He has even volunteered an unsolicited finger or toe in typing. I am also indebted to my in-laws, Dr. Sami and Nahla, for the constant stream of information they provided about the unfolding events of the Arab Spring.

Over all my writings and thoughts hovers the memory of my late mother, Dr. Ellen Brown. This is the book she always wanted me to write. In the three years since she died, I have come to appreciate neglected facets of her personality: her everyday creativity, her patience, her integrity and her commitment to defending the autonomy of individuals regardless of who they were. She taught me to understand the perspectives of others, which is, in truth, no small accomplishment. Many cities of men she saw and knew their minds. With her passing, night fell and the roads of the world grew dark. But light and color return in the curiosity and smiles of children, in the gratitude for the treasures we have received and in the loving appreciation for what remains. I thank God for the blessings I have enjoyed in my life and hope that this ‘dog on the doorstep’ can be a useful servant of God.

Notes on dates, transliteration, abbreviations and citations

I have used a minimum of transliteration in order to make this book as accessible as possible. In the body of the text, I have used the following transliterations for Arabic words. The ' character in the middle of a word represents a simple glottal stop, like the initial sounds of both syllables in 'uh-oh.' The ' symbol indicates the Arabic letter *ʿayn*, a sound absent in English but one that resembles the 'aaaah' noise a person makes when getting their throat checked by the doctor. In Arabic words, 'q' represents a voiceless velar sound produced at the back of the throat. It is non-existent in English, but one could most closely approximate this sound with the 'c' sound at the beginning of the crow noise 'Caw! Caw!' 'Gh' indicates a sound similar to the French 'r,' and 'kh' represents a velar fricative like the sound of clearing one's throat. 'Dh' indicates the 'th' sound in words like 'that' or 'bother.' 'Th' represents the 'th' sound in words like 'bath.'

I have omitted the Arabic definite article 'al-' unless it is an essential part of a construction, like the name 'Abd al-Rahman, and have retained the Arabic connective nouns 'ibn' (son of) and 'bint' (daughter of) instead of abbreviating them.

In the Notes and Bibliography I have used the standard Library of Congress transliteration system, with the non-construct *tā' marbūʿa* indicated by an 'a.' I use (ṣ) for the honorific Arabic phrase 'May the peace and blessings of God be upon him (*ṣallā Allāh ʿalayhi wa sallam*),' which is commonly said and written after Muhammad's name.

Dates in this book will follow the Common Era format unless otherwise noted.

The only unusual citation conventions in this book are those for citing mainstay Sunni Hadith collections. I have followed the standard Wensinck system of citing to the chapter, subchapter of every book (e.g., *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-buyūʿ, bāb dhikr al-khayyāṭ*) except the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal, which is cited to the common Maymaniyya print. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated in the endnotes.

The Problem(s) with Islam

A WORLD FULL OF GOD

Among the teeming and terrified crowd of protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square in January 2011, a young man and an older man crouched huddled next to each other as bullets from the security services whizzed overhead. In the din, the two spoke of how the Prophet Muhammad had once declared that whoever dies speaking truth to a tyrant will die a martyr. They spoke of the great martyrs of the Prophet's day, who awaited those latter-day believers who would one day join them in Paradise. Seized by inspiration, the young man cried, 'I will greet them for you,' stood up and was shot in the head. 'I touched his blood with my hands,' the elder man, a famous Muslim preacher, it turns out, recounted later in a TV interview. 'It smelled like perfumed musk.'¹

One of the first changes I noticed when I visited Egypt soon after Mubarak's fall was that Cairo's metro map had changed. The Mubarak station had been renamed and the dictator's name expunged from all maps and signs. Even the lists of station stops above the doors in the metro cars had been amended. They bore the station's new name, '*Shohadaa*' – The Martyrs. In the traffic-heavy Sadat station beneath Tahrir Square, posters of many of the martyrs adorned the walls in an impromptu memorial. Some were no more than enlarged photos. Others were photoshopped with roses and pious epitaphs such as 'Every soul will taste death,' a verse from the Qur'an. Looking at each poster in turn, I thought of how uncomplicated it is to honor and grieve for the fallen in the heady throes of an uprising

and its triumphal denouement. I thought about how unifying and unified a people's religion can be in such times. For the vast majority of Egyptians, these dead young men and women were not martyrs for some secular cause in a disenchanted world. The very term '*shohadaa*' comes from the Qur'an and designates those who have fought and died in the path of God.

Whether in its charred streets or its bitter media battles, revolutionary Egypt was a world full of God. Everywhere one heard the words of His revelation, the Qur'an, adorning the banners of protesters or crackling with vintage piety from radios at sidewalk tea stands, recited by bygone masters. The Islam that Egyptians turned to in their common outpouring of grief and outrage seemed at times monolithic and as uncontested as the memorials to the martyrs on the metro walls. Reality was very different. Appearing on Egyptian state TV as the protests raged, one conservative Muslim cleric denied the haloes of martyrdom claimed for those protesters who had already died. Quoting a ruling by the Prophet Muhammad, he stated that, since they had been fighting fellow Muslims, in God's eyes no one who died in Tahrir was a martyr. He called on the protesters to go home and prevent the further spilling of Muslim blood.² This cleric's voice was only one among many. Since the first glimmer of protest in Egypt there had been deep contention over Islam's position on the obedience due a ruler and a people's right to rebel. As the protests against Mubarak grew, revolutionary barricades were turned into impromptu rostra, and along with Egypt's airwaves and mosque pulpits they carried the sparring voices of political activists and Muslim clerics of all leanings making competing claims about Islam. Some of the revolutionary youth and the Muslim Brotherhood protesters quoted a famous saying of the Prophet Muhammad: 'The best jihad is a word of truth before a tyrannical ruler.' Facebook posts countered this, especially from Muslims with more conservative, Salafi leanings. They warned of the inevitable chaos of revolution and quoted another saying of the Prophet: 'Civil strife sleeps, and God curses whomever awakens it.'

As Egypt's revolution turned from protests to parliamentary elections in the wake of Mubarak's ouster, Islam and Islamists dominated the media storm. The call for Egypt to be ruled by God's law, the Shariah, resounded. It resonated with millions, alarmed millions of others, and has not ceased. The press buzzed with decades of pent-up energy, and newspapers bubbled over daily with new controversy. Would the Muslim Brotherhood allow a Coptic Christian to be president of Egypt? Would the more conservative

Islamic party of the Salafis accept a woman as president, or holding any high position? Islam and calls for rule by God's law could no longer remain mere slogans or ideals that floated above the fray of politics and legislation. Public debates centered on the details of Qur'anic verses, such as God's command that Muslims 'not take unbelievers as friends and associates in the place of believers.' Editorials inquired about what would be made of the Prophet Muhammad's warning that 'No community will flourish if it entrusts its affairs to a woman.' All political camps proffered visions of what the details of Islamic law would mean for Egypt's future. Who spoke for Islam and how the scriptural sources of the religion would be interpreted were now pressing issues of policy.

In 2012, when a body of experts was convened to begin drafting Egypt's new constitution, the proper role of Islam was by far the most controversial issue at hand. A century earlier, the answer to this question would have come from only one source: the ulama of the Al-Azhar Mosque, Egypt's most famous center of religious learning and the heart of the state's religious establishment. The ulama (literally, the learned ones) are, as Muhammad once foretold, 'the heirs of the prophets.' For the past fourteen centuries these religious scholars have articulated the expansive and intricately detailed systems of Islamic law and dogma. While the ulama of Al-Azhar acquired a pastoral aura with their unmistakable charcoal robes and white and red turbaned fezzes, Islam has never had a formal clergy. Throughout the Islamic world the ulama did eventually take on the role of religious functionaries, but they have always been more rabbi than priest. Islam is a religion erected in a scholastic idiom of preserving the sacred knowledge of revelation and studying God's law. The ulama have thus always been scholars first and foremost. They penned the countless tomes that articulated the Shariah and served as the judges who applied it. They have been the shepherds who guide the Muslim masses and the chroniclers who record the history of the *Umma*, as the global community of Muhammad's followers is known.

In Egypt today, however, the ulama of Al-Azhar are not alone. In the meetings of the constitutional drafting committee they found themselves side by side with rivals who offered their own visions of Islam. There were ulama of the Salafi movement, scholars more acquainted with Egypt's prisons than with employment in the state's religious bureaucracy, and who often work day jobs as physicians and engineers. Most Salafis acquired their religious learning in the conservative Islamic centers of Saudi Arabia

rather than in Cairo. There were others on the committee who claimed to speak for Islam as well but who had not passed through the traditional education of the ulama. Lawyers and academics who had graduated from Egypt's Western-style universities and earned recognition for their thinking on Islam, offered their own perspectives on the proper shape of Islamic law and the best ways to incorporate it into a democratic republic.

No one on the committee, not even secularists resolutely opposed to any state role for Islam, dared to make unsupported claims about what Islam is or what it demands of its followers. Whatever argument they hoped to advance, they had to reach back to the authority of the past, into the heritage built up by the ulama. They had to justify their claims, either by referring to Islam's foundational scriptures or by drawing on its millennium-long tradition of scholarly interpretation, which digested those scriptures to construct the edifice of Islamic law and theology. When the committee presented its draft constitution to the Egyptian people for approval, its second article confirmed that the primary source of legislation would be 'the principles of the Islamic Shariah.' These consisted of the religion's scriptural sources and the rational principles and methods of interpretation used to mine their meanings.*

Only a few months later, in the summer of 2013, Egypt spiraled into chaos and a military coup ousted the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi. Like Egypt as a whole, the ulama ranks fractured over contrasting visions of Islam and its proper relation to the state. Yet again the airwaves and social networks sizzled with invocations of the book of God and the words of His Prophet as devotees of the resurrected ancien régime battled Morsi supporters for the religious high ground. Tied intimately to the state apparatus and unmoved by attachment to Western ideals of democratic process, the senior Al-Azhar ulama welcomed what they saw as a return to stability. Ali Gomaa, a senior Al-Azhar cleric recently retired as Egypt's Grand Mufti, justified the coup with a parable expounded by the Prophet. The believers are passengers together on a boat; when one group starts drilling a hole in the hull they must be stopped by force or all will perish. Other ulama revealed the durability of that dimension of political consciousness that had made the Muslim Brotherhood so appealing to Muslims in the mid-twentieth century. The aged Hasan Shafi'i read

* Sadat added the present Article II to Egypt's constitution in 1980. The 2012 constitution added the definition for the 'principles of the Shariah' in Article 219, which was removed in August 2013. Article II remains intact. At the time of writing, the status of Egypt's constitution is in flux.

from the crinkled notebook paper of his prepared statement, lamenting Egypt's slide back into authoritarianism and warning desperately of the bloodshed he knew would ensue. Though he had risen to the upper levels of the Al-Azhar clerical hierarchy, he recalled his youth in the Brotherhood in the 1950s, when he had been arrested and tortured 'in ways that I had not even read about in history books.'

As Ramadan began and Egypt's summer neared the peak of its oppressive heat, supporters of ousted president Morsi gathered by the thousands for urban sit-ins. Addressing the crowds from makeshift stages, Brotherhood leaders inspired their supporters with stories of the Prophet and his Companions triumphing over their Meccan foes in battle during the Ramadan fast. When army bulldozers, shock troops and snipers cleared the encampments, leaving thousands dead in the streets, enlivened state propaganda flooded the airwaves. In an interview on a pro-coup channel, Gomaa opined that Muslim Brotherhood supporters were arch-extremists whom the state must fight and defeat at all costs. He cited the Prophet's teaching that those who attempt to fracture the unity of the Muslims must be fought, 'whoever they are.'³ The Mubarak-era media, both television and print, invoked the Prophet Muhammad's sacred authority as they cheered the army's takeover of the government. Dramatic pro-army montages incessantly extolled Egypt's military as 'the best soldiers on earth,' an apocryphal saying attributed to Muhammad.⁴ As the bloodbath continued, the military government issued a revised constitution that sought to remove much of its religious language. Yet Article II remained, perhaps too close to the bone to strip off. The principles of the Shariah remain the chief source of legislation in Egypt.

TAKING ISLAMIC SCRIPTURE AND ITS INTERPRETERS SERIOUSLY

In this book, I take the tradition of Sunni Islam* seriously and without apology. This is both merited and useful for a number of reasons. First and foremost, there is no doubt that the religious and civilizational edifice that the ulama constructed ranks among the greatest intellectual and cultural achievements in human history. It should be studied and appreciated in

* I am focusing on Sunni Islam because this book may be too long as it is, and many of the phenomena and developments discussed here are mirrored in Shiite Islam.

its own right regardless of whether one believes its claims to truth and regardless of any responsibility it might bear for contemporary crises.

Second, because the Islamic tradition formed the backbone of a world civilization, it necessarily dealt with challenges common to other religious and philosophical traditions. A study of how the Sunni ulama have tackled the challenges of interpreting scripture, applying law and guiding the laity quickly reveals that they were engaged in many of the same conversations as classical Greco-Roman philosophers, medieval Christians, Jews, Buddhists and the founders of the United States. One perennially pressing issue is the challenge of reconciling the claims of truth and justice made by scripture with what the human mind considers true and just outside it. Another is the challenge of deciding who speaks for God, balancing the need to circumscribe this authority with the danger that such controls can limit or distort God's message. A third challenge is determining the ultimate nature of truth and reality. Are those guardians who speak on behalf of scripture allowed to misrepresent surface facts for the greater good of their followers, or is such inaccuracy a betrayal of the truth they claim to hold paramount?

Finally, the solutions that the Islamic tradition produced for the global human challenges it faced offer valuable insights and reveal the limitations of Western discourse on reform in Islam. Some aspects of Islam that seem glaringly problematic today actually resulted from efforts to answer questions so fundamental that they have never been resolved definitively by anyone. Their answers are not so much right or wrong as they are choices between competing priorities, such as whether and when it is acceptable to tell a lie for a good cause.

Sometimes the solutions offered by the Islamic tradition to common challenges provide useful correctives. There is much exasperation among Western leaders over mobs of Muslim protesters failing to transcend religious chauvinisms and accept the dictates of 'reason.' Faced with this complaint, medieval ulama would observe that what one person insists is 'reasonable' is often no more than the conventions and sensibilities of their particular culture. It cannot be compelling to someone outside that culture without recourse to some transcending authority. Another common frustration with religion comes from atheists or skeptics who object that modern scientific discoveries contradict scripture and thus disprove its divine origin. This would perplex the medieval ulama. Many such discoveries are actually not that modern, they would point out, and they would

add that they had reconciled their interpretation of Islam's scriptures to such empirical observations centuries ago. Responding to the frequent calls today for a 'Muslim Martin Luther,' medieval ulama would suggest that much of the violence and extremism found in the Muslim world results precisely from unlearned Muslims deciding to break with tradition and approach their religion Luther-like 'by scripture alone.'

Scripturae is the Latin word that Western Christianity adopted to translate the Hebrew and Greek for 'things written,' which Jews and early Christians had used to describe the sacred books of the Bible. We can sense something scripture-like in most religions, though composing one global definition for scripture seems impossible. Things we would call scripture are too diverse in content and form. Perhaps the best approximation comes from Harvard's William Graham, who describes scripture as a 'sacred and authoritative text.' More exact identifications, Graham suggests, must come from the lips of the beholder. What constitutes scripture for a particular group of people is whatever that community endows with religious salience. Scripture is something created by a community or tradition when it valorizes a text as 'sacred or holy, powerful and meaningful, possessed of an exalted authority... distinct from other speech and writing.'⁵

In the West we tend to think of scripture as a discrete, tangible holy book or a closed canon of such books. It would seem by definition to take written form. Most scripture does, although the Hindu Vedas and the Zoroastrian Avesta were transmitted orally by memory for centuries before finally being set down in writing. They are at heart 'oral scripture.' Scripture can also lack clear boundaries, with semi-canonical parts enjoying a status between the sacred and the profane. Even a body of scripture as well known as the Bible in Western Christianity is not monolithic or homogeneously scriptural. The King James Bible came to include thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven books of the New. The Catholic Latin Vulgate Bible, however, includes the additional fourteen (or fifteen) books of the Apocrypha, which Jews considered valuable but did not include in the Hebrew Bible. The exact demarcations of scripture can be contested even within one sect. Many English Protestants disliked the Apocrypha, while Martin Luther maintained its books were 'useful and good to read.' There can be total disagreement about what has the status of scripture to begin with. Stoic philosophers of the first century CE honored the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as scriptural vessels of philosophical

wisdom, while at the same time the learned satirist Lucian mocked Homer for writing lies and passing them off as philosophy.⁶

Islam's scriptures were once oral but were set down in writing in time. The faith's scriptural foundation is made up of two parts. Its core is the Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be the unchanging record of God's revealed words, a small volume that can be gripped and memorized word for word. Around it are the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, amorphous and contested. A saying of the Prophet or a description of his actions is known as a Hadith, and it is primarily over the Hadiths and their contents that Islam's sects and schools of thought have diverged. What one camp considers an authentic and compelling teaching of the Prophet, another considers a forgery. In light of this contest, the exact number of supposed Hadiths defies calculation. Though both Sunni and Shiite Islam have developed compilations of Hadiths that are relied on as authoritative references, these books enjoy no monopoly. The indistinct corpus of Hadiths in Sunni as well as Shiite Islam surrounds the solid nucleus of the Qur'an like a nimbus, its inner reaches made up of a narrow band of well-known Hadiths that circumscribe the established teachings and precedent of the Prophet. These are surrounded with layer after layer of more Hadiths, becoming less and less reliable and often more controversial as they stretch outward, until their muted light fades into profane blackness.

Islam's scriptures have always posed a great obstacle to Western attempts to understand the religion. The Qur'an's format and style would strike anyone accustomed to the Bible as unusual. It is non-linear, with no one narrative flow within individual chapters or across the book as a whole. This has confounded non-Muslim readers for centuries. Despite incalculable advances in scholarship on and awareness of other lands and cultures, Christian and European reactions to the Qur'an changed little between the eighth century and the 1800s. It has always been described as disjointed and incomprehensible. Writing in the mid-700s, John of Damascus mocked the Qur'an as a bizarre mishmash of heretical Christian teachings that Muhammad had cobbled together. Even Voltaire, who lauded Islam warmly when it suited his satirical ends (like belittling the Catholic Church or Jews), dismissed the Qur'an as full of contradictions, absurdities and patent scientific falsehoods.⁷ Though he counted Muhammad as the most sincere of men (indeed one of the 'great men' who changed the course of history), Thomas Carlyle described the Qur'an as impenetrably befuddling, 'insupportable stupidity, in short.'⁸

The Hadith corpus fared better until the modern period, when these reports about Muhammad began attracting withering scholarly criticism from European orientalists. Western critics got off to a late start because, until the emergence of a historical-critical approach to the Bible in the late eighteenth century, European scholars thought of Hadiths as no different from any other type of historical report, like those compiled by antique historians about Julius Caesar. Christians who did grasp the essential scriptural character of the Hadiths, like a ninth-century Arab Christian engaged in anti-Islam polemics in Baghdad, dismissed their reliability, particularly when Hadiths attributed miraculous acts to the Prophet Muhammad. Such early attacks on Hadiths from non-Muslims in Baghdad were facilitated by the ulama's admission that they had themselves uncovered thousands and thousands of forged Hadiths.⁹

Whether due to the challenges of accessing Islam's scriptures or because of media bias, students have asked me more than once if Islam is a 'real' religion. This question is not absurd in the United States, where lawmakers and lawyers have argued in court that Islam is a cult undeserving of the legal protections afforded 'proper' faiths. Nor is the question unthinkable in the UK, where Tony Blair recently opined that 'there is a problem within Islam.'¹⁰ In such an environment it is not easy to convince people to take Islam seriously as a religion. It is an even taller order to ask folk to treat it as it unquestionably deserves, namely as one of humanity's most accomplished and relevant intellectual traditions.

This is not to say that Western criticisms of Islam, as well as those coming from disapproving Muslims, are difficult to understand. Few things seem more repugnant than religious intolerance, luring young men to murderous deaths with carnal promises of virgins in Heaven, allowing polygamy and marrying teenage girls to old men. Though such practices might have been acceptable at some point in the past, few in the West would welcome them in this day and age. Speaking for a West proud of having cast off centuries of superstition and religious extremism, Tony Blair explained that such Muslim practices and values are 'not compatible with pluralistic, liberal, open-minded societies.' His words echo the common diagnosis, bandied about as self-evident truth by Western media pundits, that the Muslim world needs its own Reformation and Enlightenment.

It is often difficult, however, to distinguish those criticisms of Islam that are grounded in demonstrable moral realizations from those that merely mask cultural biases. Often Islam's most denounced barbarisms are nothing

more than prosaic differences in dietary preference and dress. In the 2012 Oscar-winning film *Argo*, a mob of fanatical, screaming men with unkempt beards and women in headscarves storms the US embassy in 1979 Tehran. The American embassy staff are besieged along with the good, modern Iranians, beardless and with uncovered hair, who are waiting for visas for the US. The dangers facing the film's protagonist as he makes his way by air to the newly declared Islamic Republic are signaled by the flight attendants announcing forebodingly that the crew will collect any remaining alcoholic beverages. When he escapes Iran's airspace, his safety is marked by the attendant announcing that passengers are now free to imbibe.

Whether the subject is Iran, Egypt, Turkey or Tunisia, the narrative of Islam in the Western media and blogosphere is almost always the same. Tradition is gradually giving way to modernity. Black veils and prohibition mark the former. Flowing hair, Western dress and a good drink mark the latter. Open-minded, critical scholars are revealing cracks in the vaults of religious orthodoxy and allowing the light of modern reason to shine in. Islamists and the dragoons of conservatism might win battles, but in time the forces of liberal democracy will win the war. All they want, after all, is to live in a reasonable and tolerant country. News provides much of the fodder for this narrative, such as the taped testimonials of suicide bombers describing their desire to enter a Paradise with its seventy-two virgins promised to martyrs. Films like *Argo* and television serials reinforce and complement these images so routinely and unnecessarily that one hardly notices. A film with no logical link to Islam, *Taken* (2008), follows Liam Neeson as he hunts down the heartless Albanian (Muslim) syndicate that has kidnapped his teenage daughter until he finally finds the corpulent, yacht-owning Arab (Muslim) sheik who has purchased her, killing him only moments before this villain can deflower her.

The gratuitous anti-Muslim racism in *Taken* points to a larger realization. The West's problem with Islam is not at its core an objective matter of those who have achieved Enlightenment disapproving of those who have not, or of the modern, secular and liberal rebuffing the traditional, fanatical and conservative. It runs too deep into the past, with too much consistency and too much blindness to its own absurdity. Whether in its dispensation of Byzantium, Christendom (the Latin West) or in its modern form, the Christian Mediterranean/West has a problem with Islam per se. Even for the giants of Enlightenment thought, who built the intellectual foundations of modern secularism, religion was not the problem. Voltaire

and Rousseau certainly called out the unparalleled dangers posed by intolerant and extreme forms of any religion, but Islam was inherently dangerous. Montesquieu wrote that 'a religion must temper the mores of men' in order to be 'true.' Islam did not meet this standard, in his opinion. Seemingly neglecting countless dynastic wars, the Crusades (with their array of heretical Christian, Muslim and Jewish targets) and the Reformation Wars of Religion, Montesquieu remarked that Christianity has nurtured peace, benevolent monarchies and liberal republics. Islam, by contrast, has fostered violence and despots.¹¹

European lists of the affronts committed by Islam were well worn long before the budding of Enlightenment sensibilities. In fact, they go back to the earliest Eastern and later Latin Christian confrontations with Muslims. The themes of Muslim violence and excessive, dangerous sexuality loom large in the first Christian writings against Islam, such as those of John of Damascus in the mid-eighth century. Pope Urban II's call for the First Crusade in 1095 invoked the barbaric destruction supposedly wrought by the armies of Islam on the Holy Land. Martin Luther's invective against the Ottoman Turks draws on perennial tropes of Muslims' penchant for murder and their religion's disregard for 'proper' marriage.¹²

The Enlightenment's Republic of Letters elaborated a more supercilious air of moral disapproval. Its condemnation of Islam was a study in cognitive dissonance. The French Enlightenment critic of Christian backwardness, Pierre Bayle, did launch equally barbed comments against Islam. He decried the religion's unfair treatment of women, permission of spousal beating and divorce. Yet he seems not to have minded that France in his day denied married women the right to own property or divorce their husbands. His contemporary, Lady Montagu, who had actually frequented the harems of Istanbul and befriended Ottoman women, objected that 'tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have,' since they enjoyed full rights to property and movement.¹³ Only in 1938 did French women attain full capacity before the law, managing to acquire rights that the architects of the Shariah had granted women as early as the seventh century. In their efforts to bring the legal system of their Indian Muslim subjects closer in line with 'justice, equity and good conscience,' British colonial administrators remarked on what they considered the brutal and inhuman punishments meted out by Islamic law. Yet one awkward adjustment made by the British was to remedy how difficult they found it to sentence criminals to death in the Shariah courts they oversaw, since Shariah law acknowledged only

five capital crimes. East India Company judges no doubt pined for justice back home, where in the 1820s British law listed over two hundred death-penalty offenses, including stealing firewood and poaching fish.¹⁴

Western antipathy for Islam has included contempt for the ulama. Even at the dawn of serious European study of the Islamic tradition in the late seventeenth century, it was already assumed that Muslim scholars had little to offer Europeans trying to dissect Islam and Islamic history. Voltaire proclaimed that Muslims had no knowledge of their own Prophet until the English scholar George Sale undertook a study of Muhammad.¹⁵ As industrial wealth, scientific discovery and military might elevated European scholars to new heights of confidence, criticisms of Islam's scholarly tradition intensified accordingly. The benightedness of the East as a whole was not a matter of debate among European colonizers, but the medieval scholarly heritage of Islam attracted particular contempt. 'The entire native literature of India and Arabia' was not worth 'a single shelf of a good European library,' concluded the British historian Macaulay in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶ In his immensely popular faux travel log, *The Persian Letters*, Montesquieu posed as a Persian visitor to France who, among many disillusioned reflections on his homeland, expresses his realization that Persia's ulama had never been able to answer any real questions of morality or religious profundity. They could do no more than quote scripture by rote.¹⁷ Although he fawned over the romantic purity of early, Arabian Islam, the nineteenth-century French historian Ernest Renan concluded that the Persian and Turkish peoples who had borne Islam through the medieval period and into the modern world had adulterated it irretrievably. In particular, he considered the medieval scholarly traditions of Sunni theology to be irrational and intolerant, propagated by the ulama's dogmatic and barren educational system.¹⁸

Western scholarly and scientific development was, of course, eminently indebted to Islamic civilization in fields from medicine (Avicenna's *Qanun* was used as the standard medical textbook in Europe through the seventeenth century) to scholastic theology (Thomas Aquinas admitted relying heavily on Averroes to understand Aristotle). Yet Renaissance heralds of Europe's newfound scientific promise could not admit their vast indebtedness to the hated, infidel Saracens. Avicenna, Averroes and other undeniably prominent Muslims in the Western scholarly pantheon had to be uprooted completely from their 'Islamic' environment.¹⁹ Avicenna the physician was not recognized as Ibn Sina the Islamic philosopher

and mystic. Europeans embraced the Andalusian philosopher Averroes, who wrote such illuminating commentaries on Aristotle and Plato. They ignored that Ibn Rushd, as he was actually called, was the chief Shariah judge of Cordoba and a luminary of the ulama who spent two decades writing a comprehensive manual of Islamic law. To their own detriment, Europeans also neglected Ibn Rushd's groundbreaking reconciliation of religion and philosophy.²⁰ The credit that Muslim scholars would receive from pioneers of modernism like Henri de Saint-Simon and even numerous *National Geographic* issues would not go beyond their role in 'transmitting Greek learning' to the West.²¹ When Western scholars have evinced an appreciation or admiration for Islamic scholarship, it is never for the religious sciences of law, language theory, exegesis, scriptural criticism or theology, which formed the voluminous core of the ulama's world.

This is a book about how a community has understood those scriptures that it considers its foundations. It is about a faith tradition that came to believe that God had revealed the truth to humankind in the form of revelation to His Prophet and that was then faced with the challenge of understanding what that truth meant in distant times and places, both as an ideal and as a practiced reality binding that community together. This is a book about a proud, at times overconfident tradition that had its cosmology of truth shattered by a confrontation not only with a more powerful civilization but also with a new stage in human history. It is about how that tradition has responded, sometimes turning inward to defend its integrity and sometimes adopting the novel and the strange. This is a book about how Sunni Islam was constructed and reconstructed, about the scriptures on which it was built and the ulama who built it.

In the end, this book is a sort of paean to an intellectual and religious tradition that nurtured a light of wisdom not only for its own adherents but for outsiders as well. As demonstrated by the many books and TV specials on Islamic science and the plethora of works on Sufism in Western bookstores, the scientific and spiritual treasures of this wisdom have been recognized. What I hope to bring forth in this book is Islam's contributions to an area at once profoundly theoretical but also eminently practical, namely the science of interpreting scripture, reconciling its claims of truth and justice with what is true and just outside its text. I hope to offer glimpses into the world of the ulama and their books, a world that I at first wanted to observe as an object of study but soon found to be an interlocutor that all too often showed me the limitations of the worldview I had grown up

in and revealed my own intellectual arrogance. It was sitting at the feet of particularly capable ulama in Al-Azhar and elsewhere, watching them perform the delicate and controversial tasks of interpreting Islam's scriptures in a fraught time, that I really learned to think. Their story deserves to be told in its own right. Though I try to limit myself to narrating this journey, there are points at which I cannot keep silent and, as one says in Arabic, 'pour out my own bucket from the well.' I will begin this book as the ulama have always ended theirs, with the admission that I may well be wrong and that 'God knows best.'